

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Don’t Lose Heart”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 10—June 10, 2018

Lessons: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

“So we do not lose heart.”

I’ve been rereading a small book of sermons delivered by Harry Emerson Fosdick in Riverside Church in the midst of the Second World War. The title of that book is: *A Great Time To Be Alive—Sermons on Christianity in Wartime*. The first sermon in that book begins: “This certainly is a ghastly time to be alive.”¹ In a great many ways, our time is also a perfectly awful time to be alive. Whatever your political leanings or opinions, I think we can all agree that right now is not our finest hour as a nation. As of the end of May, according to CNN, there have been twenty-three school shootings this year where someone was hurt or killed. The stock market may be going up, and the jobs report may be good, but, according to Bread for the World, nearly 15 percent of U.S. households — approximately 49 million Americans, including 15.9 million children — struggle to put food on the table. A dozen members of our armed forces have been killed in the line of duty this year and others continue to serve in the longest war in U.S. history. Thursday early evening a sixteen-year-old boy here in Wilmington was shot and thankfully is recovering. Children continue to suffer in Syria. Children of immigrants are being separated from their parents and none of this begins to deal with the normal difficulties and challenges we face in our own daily living. It is an awful time to be alive.

However, in the spirit of Paul Harvey, I want to suggest today that this is not the whole story. Our current reality, awful as it may be, is not all there is to see. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”² Don’t just look at the outside reality. Look also at what cannot be seen. Remember what Antoine de Saint-Exupéry explained in *The Little Prince*: “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”³ Look at what God continues to do even in the midst of the horrors and brokenness that surround us. The world may be perfectly ghastly, but we do not lose heart, because we serve a God who is able to make of us a single family, sending us forward to move the world toward what God would have it be. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead, is raising the likes of us, so that grace may extend to more and more people.

In the days following the election in 2016, Theodore Wardlaw, the president of Austin Seminary wrote to his community saying: “In pivotal moments like this, whether our preferred candidate won or lost, people of faith have an obligation to remember the essential ingredients that define us in our relationship with God and with one another. These ingredients include character, justice, love, and a holy memory of, and participation in, God’s engagement with the world from the very beginning. Above all else Christians need to hold before us that essential ingredient that makes

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Great Time To Be Alive, Sermons on Christianity in Wartime*. Harper & Brothers. © 1944

² 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1, New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard. © 2000.

life meaningful in all seasons, and that is hope. *Now hope that is seen is not hope*, Paul writes to the church in Rome. *For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

“I encourage you [writes Ted Wardlaw] in these days ahead (as in all our days), to practice with new vigor the vocation of hoping for, and working for, what we do not yet see: a vision of the creation as God sees it. Such a vision invites us to see each person – rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, gay or straight, black or brown or white, male or female, someone from the global North or someone from the global South – as a child of God. This vision also invites our nation to practice continually, at home and around the world, its particular stewardship for that noble value of “liberty and justice for all.”⁴

This may be an awful time to be alive, but we know the rest of the story. We know as we will sing again in six months’ time, that God rules the world with truth and grace. Even now, God is using us to share something of God’s grace in our hurting world. Cooking a meal for Emmanuel Dining Room will not end world hunger, but for a handful of people, they will enjoy a hot meal so that at least for that day, they won’t be hungry. Raising the funds to purchase a latrine for people in Guatemala won’t end the difficulties or challenges faced by people there, but it will provide a little dignity and cleanliness and safety for one family. Those who deliver Meals on Wheels may be the only visitor that client sees all day. They simply provide a meal, and with that meal, a little love and grace. Our prayer group here won’t solve all the problems of our world, and truth be told, we’ve sometime wondered if our prayers are heard, but for those of us who have been on the receiving end of those prayers, we know the strength we’ve found in being surrounded by faithful people. Those prayer partners have given others the strength not to lose heart. Our outer nature may be wasting away, but our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

There is a story told by Dr. William Buchholz, who overheard a conversation between two oncologists one morning at a breakfast before they presented papers to the American Society of Clinical Oncology. One was complaining bitterly.

“You know Bob, I just don’t understand it. We used the same drugs, the same dosage, the same schedule, and the same entry criteria. Yet I got a 22 percent response rate and you got a 74 percent. That’s unheard of for metastatic lung cancer. How do you do it?”

“We’re both using Etoposide, Platinol, Oncovin and Hydroxyurea. You call yours EPOH. I tell my patients I am giving them HOPE. Sure, I tell them this is experimental, and we go over the long list of side effects together. But I emphasize that we have a chance. As dismal as the statistics are for non-small cell, there are always a few percent who do really well.”⁵

The world is in a particularly difficult place. We all know that. That’s what everyone can see. But even if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Even in this broken world, God is about the work of renewal in ways and places that we can’t see. Even right now God calls us to be about that work of restoration of hoping and working for what we do not yet see: a vision of the creation as God sees it. So, do not lose heart; God has work for us to do.

Let us pray: In our hurting world, O God, open our hearts to see what our eyes cannot: your resurrection power at work in the world, so that grace may extend to more and more people, increasing thanksgiving and all to your glory. Amen.

⁴ Letter from T.J. Wardlaw to Staff, Students, and Faculty of Austin Theological Seminary, November 10, 2016.

⁵ William M. Buchholz, MD, The Medical Uses of Hope, The Western Journal of Medicine, January 1988.